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ABSTRACT

This paper examines formal goal statements for education systems from 43 states to determine the overall context of such statements, governance of education goals, and goals related directly to students and learning. Context is explored by determining who is responsible for developing goal statements, the reasons for articulating education goals, and the general features of goal statements. Education governance goals discussed involve management functions and program objectives. Academic, work-related, self-fulfillment, interpersonal, and societal goals related directly to student learning are also discussed. Although equity, freedom of access, and accountability remain as goals, the paper concludes that more recent statements have emphasized the quality of education and awareness of the importance of higher-order skills. (PB)

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29. Responding To Change: Goals for State Public Education

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29. Responding To Change: Goals for State Public Education

The Issue

In the last several years, the priorities of the American education system shifted subtly. States and school districts have seen an emphasis on equity and freedom of access shift to concern for the quality of education and an awareness of the importance of higher-order skills. Although the public still demands that the education system be "accountable," the meaning of that term now seems less tied to matters of management and procedure than to good educational results.

Do the formal goals that states establish for their education systems reflect the overall shifts in education priorities? To what extent do written statements of goals continue to reflect earlier concerns such as equity and accountability? To try to answer these questions, ECS has compiled and analyzed goal statements from the states.

The Context

Who develops goal statements? Within most states two units are directly responsible for elementary/secondary (and often vocational) education: the state board and the state department of education. Typically, the state board has primary responsibility for establishing policies, and the state department of education administers them. Both units

are in a position to articulate goals for the state's public elementary and secondary education system, and both often publish some kind of document on state goals.

What are the reasons for articulating education goals? A written statement of goals helps give direction to state agencies, local districts and schools. Setting goals, establishing priorities, delineating functions, or defining the mission of education -- the terminology varies from state to state -- helps education officials focus the energies of the system. It also provides policy makers with a starting point, a standard against which progress can be measured. Once goals have been made explicit, reviewing and revising them -- which many states, in fact, list as a goal -- can be facilitated.

Another purpose that goal statements serve is to keep the public informed of state activities in education and to demonstrate that the state is responding to public demands. For example, many statements specifically mention improving teacher quality, an issue that has been widely discussed for several years. States can use these statements to bolster public confidence by assuring their citizens that education takes their concerns into account. Many states prepare statements of goals in brochure form for wide distribution.

What are the general features of goal statements? Statements of goals often combine discussion of what is currently happening in state education with discussion of what policy makers would like to see happen. Terms like "improve," "strengthen," or "increase" appear frequently; this implies that more of what is already being done is needed. Also frequent are terms like "develop" or "provide," which indicate issues that the state may be interested in exploring.

Although a few of the statements are very short, no more than several paragraphs, many states publish lists of goals that run several pages. Long statements tend to cover not only all levels of the education governance structure but also the larger community. Although statements incorporate the thinking, assessments and projections of education policy makers, they are not necessarily tied to budget realities (although wise use of funds is often mentioned as a goal). In some ways, a statement of goals is a sort of "wish list" which can include, without the need to compromise, diverse or even conflicting goals. Actually meeting a major goal or combination of several goals might, for example, require more money than a state could readily supply. A statement nonetheless can serve a real purpose for policy makers, especially if it provides an overview of state needs, and

also for members of the public concerned about education's direction and purposes.

Contents of Goal Statements

ECS requested copies of goal statements from all the states. Forty-three states responded; the remaining seven either had no written statements, or were in the process of revising their statements. (Statistics in this Issuegram are based on the 43 states that sent statements.) Two-thirds of the statements received had been compiled since 1980.

What types of goals relate to the governance of education?

Management functions. The state department of education and other state agencies manage the education system by administering various programs, disbursing funds, setting out regulations, and so forth. Not surprisingly, since management is a major agency function, 60& of the statements mentioned some form of efficient management, such as economy in the operation of schools.

Management style also seems to be reflected in the goal statements. In some of them (16%) terms like "monitor," "compliance" or "control" were used to describe how state agencies administer programs. More common in these descriptions (found in 53% of the responses) were terms like "provide leadership to assist districts" or "coordinate with local districts," phrases that seem to indicate a style of providing assistance to school districts that is less "directive" and more "facilitative." A few states (14%) directly encouraged school districts or schools to take the initiative or to be creative in providing services and solving problems.

Although the use of terms indicative of one management style did not preclude use of terms indicative of the others, the trend seems to be toward facilitative management by state agencies and away from control. This seems congruent with the general shift in American society from centralized to decentralized control and administration. The value of decentralization to education is supported by recent research showing that the school improvement process is often most successful when local districts and schools are substantively involved from the beginning.

Goal statements often exhibited state agency plans in specific areas. A goal for 23% of the states was improvement in the technical assistance capabilities of state departments of education. Agency staff development was a goal in 16% of the states; review and evaluation of the agency or of the

whole state education system was a goal in 35% of the states. About one-fourth of the state agencies set long-range planning as a goal. Forty-two percent emphasized curriculum development, often specifying the development of an energy curriculum. An echo of the school finance reforms of the Seventies: 47% of the states listed financial adequacy or equity, and occasionally school finance review, as an education goal. And as a general statement, 58% of the states listed the overall improvement of education quality.

Programmatic objectives. Sixty-five percent of the states addressed issues of teacher and administrator development in some way, calling for such measures as better inservice training for teachers, review of certification requirements, recruitment of qualified teacher candidates and review of college preparatory courses. This is not surprising, since concern for teacher quality is widespread and allied issues are discussed regularly in the media.

Meeting the needs of special students is a goal of 56% of the states. The range of students with special needs is wide, covering handicapped, gifted and talented students, bilingual students, students whose ability to speak English is limited and students who need remedial help. Alternative programs for dropouts and students who do not function adequately in regular classrooms were a goal of 14% of the states. Thirty percent of the states mentioned improved technology for classroom instruction or data processing and other administrative procedures.

A number of statements addressed issues raised by the relationship of schools to the community. Fostering community involvement -- often meaning the involvement of parents -- was a goal in 30% of the states. Perhaps indicative of an emerging development, seven states specifically encouraged some coordination with business and labor, calling for partnerships of schools and business, for example, or an attempt by schools to meet the future needs of business.

What goals relate directly to students and learning?

Management goals affect students, but their focus is on institutional operations and programs. Many states also set "learner goals" that center on individual student's knowledge and skills.

Academic. Because the "back to basics" movement has been strong during the last few years, it is not surprising to find that the learner goal most frequently mentioned by states (60%) is acquisition of basic skills in reading,

writing and arithmetic. Approximately half of these states extend the list with other basics such as problem solving, communication (a broader goal that adds listening and speaking to reading and writing), or skills in metric measurement, science, history or government. Several states go beyond the basics to the need for general knowledge in the social sciences, the humanities and the arts. Reasoning, experimentation, complex decision making, evaluating and other higher-order skills that enable students to use knowledge are a goal of one-third of the states. Although most states assess students' progress systematically, assessment was mentioned specifically in only one-fourth of the goal statements.

Work-related. More than half the states established work-related goals for students, like acquiring the skills needed for specific jobs, or, more broadly, an understanding of career alternatives and job markets. Many states emphasized the importance of training (or retraining) adult learners in job-related skills. Some states set goals of providing students with "survival" skills. Being able to function in a changing technological world was one such goal; so was an ability to function as an intelligent consumer in the economic system (mentioned by one-fourth of the states).

Self-fulfillment. Nearly half the states set goals related to self-fulfillment through sound health habits, the creative use of leisure time, participation in sports and recreation activities and the development of self-respect and moral, ethical and spiritual values.

Interpersonal. The development of students' interpersonal abilities was a goal set by 53% of the states. Included was the ability to function as a family member and a group member and an awareness and appreciation of one's own culture and of other cultures in the world.

Societal. Nearly half the states set goals related to the responsibilities of good citizenship and participation in the democratic system. Interestingly, a couple of states also included students' ability to know when the system ought to be changed if it is not functioning adequately. Some states listed specifics of citizenship like voting and political participation. In addition, several states mentioned an understanding of the natural environment and its resources.

Half the states specifically mentioned equal educational opportunity for all citizens, regardless of race, sex, handicap, or national origin.

Conclusion

Goal statements were most often forward-looking in tone and substance and covered most of the issues likely to be paramount in the years to come -- such as technology, quality, personnel development and adult retraining. But a few issues that are currently receiving considerable attention elsewhere were rarely addressed in goal statements. Seldom mentioned was defining education's place in an "information society" whose economy is based not on industry but on information processing. Furthermore, the goal of improved cooperation with the private sector appears less frequently than might have been predicted, given the general recognition of its growing importance. And the issues of choice -- that is, of private schools or home instruction as alternatives to public schools and of related financial matters like vouchers and tax credits -- were virtually never addressed. Why these issues are not addressed is open to speculation. Perhaps state policy makers have not felt their impact. However, the goals statement may not be the appropriate place for airing unresolved issues, since political constraints no doubt limit what can be included in goals that are widely accepted in a state and generally supported by policy makers and the public.

Although state education agencies set many different types of goals, two general trends seem evident. First, the agencies continue to improve their ability to relate to local districts (and schools) through improved technical assistance, staff development, attention to local concerns and more comprehensive planning. Second, they are concerned with outcomes of the whole education process. As public interest in the quality of education has grown, states have responded by setting goals like providing more instruction in basic skills, providing more job-related training, and developing higher-order skills.

Equity and freedom of access remain as goals, however. So does accountability, augmented by an emphasis on helping school districts -- and, in some cases, encouraging them to establish their own priorities, plans and evaluations.

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